

## **Anxiety or Aggression? When Anxiety in Children Looks Like Anger, Tantrums, or Meltdowns**

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Anxiety can be a masterful imposter. In children, it can sway away from the more typical avoidant, clingy behaviour and show itself as tantrums, meltdowns and aggression. As if anxiety wasn't hard enough to deal with!

When children are under the influence of an anxious brain, their behaviour has nothing to do with wanting to push against the limits. They are often great kids who don't want to do the wrong thing, but they are being driven by a brain in high alert.

If we could see what was happening in their heads when anxiety takes hold like this, their behaviour would make sense. We would want to scoop them up and take them away from the chaos of it all. Of course, that doesn't mean that they should be getting a free pass on their unruly behaviour. Their angry behaviour makes sense, and it's important to let them know this, but there will always be better choices they are capable of making.

Once kids have a more solid understanding of why they do what they do, they will be well on their way to finding a better response. Here's where the adults in their lives will make a critical difference. Parents, grandparents, teachers – anyone who is able to understand and respond to their behaviour as something driven by anxiety, rather than 'naughty' behaviour, will be helping them to find healthier, stronger, more effective ways to respond to the world. All kids have it in them to do this, but anxiety can have a sly way of stealing the attention from their strengths. Now to put an end to that.

### **Anxiety or Aggression?**

Anxiety happens when a part of the brain, the amygdala, senses trouble. When it senses threat, real or imagined, it surges the body with hormones (including cortisol, the stress hormone) and adrenaline to make the body strong, fast and powerful. This is the fight or flight response and it has been keeping us alive for thousands of years. It's what strong, healthy brains are meant to do.

An anxious brain is a strong, healthy brain that is a little overprotective. It is more likely to sense threat and hit the panic button 'just in case'. When this happens often, it can create 'anxiety about the anxiety'. One of the awful things about anxiety is the way it launches without warning, and often without need, sending an unsuspecting body unnecessarily into fight or flight.

For kids with anxiety, any situation that is new, unfamiliar, difficult or stressful counts as a potential threat. The fight or flight response happens automatically and instantaneously, sending neurochemicals surging through their bodies, priming them for fight or flight. Every physical symptom that comes with anxiety – racy heart, sick tummy, clammy skin, vomiting, shaky arms or legs – is because of the surging of these neurochemicals. The natural end to the fight or flight response is intense physical activity. If the threat was real, they'd be fighting for their lives or running for it. When there is no need to fight or flee, there is nothing to burn up the neurochemicals and they build up, causing the physical symptoms of anxiety. ([For a detailed child-friendly explanation of what causes each of the physical symptoms of anxiety, see here.](#))

If anxiety is having a hand in the angry behaviour, the signs of anxiety will still be there in some way. Look for any type of avoidant behaviour, sick tummies, headaches, sensitivity to new or unfamiliar situations. Any of these might be a clue that anxiety is hard at work. Take note of when the meltdowns or

tantrums happen. Is there a pattern? Do they seem to happen more in unfamiliar situations or situations that might overspend your child's emotional resources?

### **Why do some kids show anxiety as anger?**

Anxiety is often associated with avoidance or clinginess but it doesn't necessarily always present itself primarily in this way. The physiological driver is the same – a brain under threat – but instead of *flight*, it initiates *fight*. It doesn't matter that there's nothing at all there to worry about. When the brain thinks there's trouble, it acts as though it's true.

Think of this like a smoke alarm. A smoke alarm can't tell the difference between a real fire and burnt toast, and it doesn't care. All it wants to do is keep you safe. It does this by making enough noise to get a response. Better safe than sorry. The brain works the same way. An anxious brain is a very protective brain, and it will be quicker to hit the alarm, even when there is no need. This could happen in response to unfamiliar situations or people, playground scuffles, criticism, disappointment, threat of embarrassment or failure – anything that could potentially trigger the feeling that something bad may be about to happen.

The fight response is the brain's adaptive way of giving a young body the physical resources it needs to deal with a situation that feels potentially harmful. Remember, this reaction happens automatically and instantly. It's so quick that there's no time for any conscious consideration as to whether or not the threat is real.

As part of growing up, children regularly find themselves in unfamiliar situations where they have to negotiate and learn strategies for dealing with the world and its people. This is how they learn emotional and social skills that will move them towards being strong, healthy adults. In the meantime though, for an anxious brain, it's trouble at every turn! Any situation that puts expectations on them and demands that could exceed their own developing resources will have the potential to trigger anxiety.

Like the flight response (avoidance, clinginess), the fight response is an automatic, hardwired response from a brain that thinks it's under threat. That doesn't mean that kids can't be taught to control it – they absolutely can – but first they need to understand what's happening.

As the adults in their lives, it's important to be open to the possibility that beneath an aggressive, disruptive child, is an anxious one looking for security and comfort. If anxiety is at play, dealing with aggression as bad behaviour will always inflame the situation. On the other hand, dealing with it as anxiety will give them the strategies and support they need to find their way through, as well as teaching them vital skills that will hold them strong for the rest of their lives.

### **Practical ways to deal with anxiety-driven aggression. What kids need to know.**

- **Explain where anxiety comes from.**

Kids can do amazing things with the right information, and it's important not to underestimate their potential for understanding. When it is something that is personally relevant, their capacity for understanding is immense. Here's what they need to know, but it doesn't need to happen all at once. Giving them the information over lots of small, incidental chats will be just as powerful.

'Those times you get really angry are probably confusing for you. I know you don't want to do the wrong thing and I think it will help if I explain what happens when you get angry like that. First of all, you need to know that everyone gets angry for all sorts of different reasons. Your reason is a really good one – it's because your brain is working hard to protect you.'

There's a special part of your brain called the amygdala. We all have one. The amygdala's job is to warn you of danger and keep you safe. Think of it like your own little warrior, there to protect you. Yours works especially hard. When it thinks there might be danger, it surges your body with a type of superhero fuel – oxygen, hormones, and adrenalin – to make you strong fast and powerful enough to deal with the danger.

This could be anything that your brain thinks might hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable – new people, new places, too much noise, having to do something that feels risky. Everybody has something that makes them feel anxious. We're all the same like that.

Your brain doesn't care if there actually is something there that could hurt you. It just wants to keep you safe, so it fuels you up just in case. There's a really cool name for this – it's called fight or flight – fight the danger or run from it. Guess which one your brain gets you ready for. It's getting you ready to *fight* the danger.

This happens really fast – so fast that you won't even realise it's happening until you have the angry feelings inside you. Your brain is super speedy and it surges you with fight or flight fuel before it has even thought about whether or not the danger is real. This happens in all of us, but in some people it happens more, especially at times when there's no need for it. More than anything in the world, your brain wants to protect you and it works really hard to do this – even at times you don't really need protecting.

Here's something important you need to know: The same part of the brain that has the very important job of keeping you safe and ready to deal with trouble, also deals with your emotions. When it thinks you might be in danger, it switches on. When it's on, your emotions will be switched on too. Sometimes they will be switched on big time! This is why you might feel like you want to burst into tears or get really angry.

None of this means that you can blame your brain for losing your temper. What it means is that you have a really strong healthy brain that works hard to look after you. It wants to be the boss of things, but everything will run smoother when you're the one in charge of your brain!

There's something else about brains that you need to know. Brains change. They're pretty amazing like that. At the moment, your brain tends to be a little overprotective of you but you can train it so that it doesn't react as much when there's no danger about. It will still protect you by letting you know when there's trouble and it will still be awesome at getting you ready to deal with it, but it won't do it as much when it doesn't need to.

There are a few things you can do to be the boss of your brain and train it to relax more. It will still be ready to fuel you up if there actually is danger, but if you're the boss of your brain, you get the final say. What this means is that when there is no danger, you'll be able to settle your brain much quicker. Let's talk about some ways to do that.'

- **Breathe – but you probably haven't breathed like this before!**

'Strong deep breaths will always calm an anxious brain (and an angry one!) but that's not so simple when your brain is busy trying to keep you safe. The last thing it wants to do when it's in protective warrior mode is to take time out to relax. It thinks that there is some serious work to be done to keep you safe! First let's talk about why strong deep breaths work, then some special ways to get your breathing perfect.

Strong breathing calls up the front part of your brain, called the prefrontal cortex, which is a part of your brain that is able to calm things down and think things through. When your amygdala thinks there's

danger, it gets bossy and tells this part of the brain that it's not needed. This is why it's so important for you to learn how to be the boss of your brain. When you're in charge, you can get the front part of your brain involved in deciding whether or not to fight or flee.

This is really important. The front of your brain is great at calming your amygdala – the part that's triggering your fight and the angry feelings.

How do you get the front of your brain involved? By breathing. Breathing is like a lullaby for your amygdala. It helps it to realise that there's nothing to worry about. When this happens, the amygdala will calm down and so will you. But – you have to practice breathing when you aren't angry. It's too hard to do new things when you're really upset. We all struggle with that! Breathing strong breaths is like any new skill. The more you do it, the better you'll get.

Here are some fun ways to practice – and it will take some practice, so be patient and keep doing it every day.

### ***Is that hot cocoa you're holding?!***

Pretend you are holding a mug of hot cocoa. Breathe in for three seconds through your nose, as though you are smelling the delicious rich chocolatey smell. Then pretend to blow it cool, by breathing out through your mouth for three seconds. Keep doing this four or five times, then you'll start to feel yourself relax.

### ***Find yourself a breathing buddy.***

Put a soft toy on your belly. Breathe in for three, hold it for a second and then breathe out for three. If the toy is moving, you're breathing deep into your belly – just like strong breathing is meant to be. You've got it.

Remember we talked about changing your brain? Every time you breathe through your anxious feeling, you're helping to change and strengthen your brain. You're doing something pretty amazing and the more you do it, the better you'll get – but you do have to practice!

### **• Have your powerful thoughts ready.**

'When you start to feel yourself getting angry, this is the time to let your brain know you're the boss. Here's the secret – you'll have to work out what to think, and practice thinking it, *before* you get angry. The more you practice, the easier it will get. After you've been practicing it for a while, you'll be able to find your powerful thought without any effort at all. Just like your breathing though, it will take practice. Work out what your powerful thoughts will be. Pretend that you are speaking to your amygdala – that fierce little warrior of yours that is trying to keep you safe. It will always be ready to listen. Practice it out loud or quietly in your head. It's up to you. 'It's okay warrior dude. We're all good here. You can relax. There's nothing that can hurt us here.' Then, keep practicing your strong brave thoughts until they become automatic, which they will.'

### **And other things to do with them.**

### **• Mindfulness.**

The research on the effectiveness of mindfulness could fill its own library. Mindfulness has been proven over and over to have enormous capacity to build a strong body, mind and spirit. Building the brain against anxiety is one of its wonders.

Anxiety happens when the brain spends too much time in the future. This is where it grabs on to the ‘what ifs’. Mindfulness strengthens it to stay in the present. It’s simple, and kids take hold of the concept beautifully. They are mindful little beings anyway, but the more they can strengthen this skill, the stronger they will be. It’s a wonderful skill to have, anxious or not.

Mindfulness is about stepping back and seeing thoughts and feelings come and go, without judgement, but with a relaxed mind. It has been shown to strengthen the connection between the instinctive, emotional back of the brain (the heartland of the fight or flight response) and the pre-frontal cortex (the part of the brain that soothes it back to calm).

Mindfulness for children generally works best it’s kept to about five minutes or less but let them keep going for as long as they want to. [Here are some fun ways to practice mindfulness with kids.](#)

- Name it to tame it.

Big emotions live in the right side of the brain. The words that make sense of those emotions live in the left. Sometimes, there is a disconnect between the two. It can happen in all of us. When there is a disconnect, there are big feelings, but they feel overwhelming and they don’t make sense.

Think of it like this. The left part of the brain is ‘this is what’s happening’. It is the literal understanding of the world – the concrete data, the facts. The right part of the brain is ‘this is how I feel about what’s happening’. It’s a more emotional, intuitive understanding of the world. If we only had our left brain, we would have great detail (‘this happened and then this happened’), but it would be a colder, more detached way of responding. If we only had our right brain we would have a sense of how we felt about an experience, and there would be plenty of emotion, but the more rational understanding would be missing. The detail of the world is important (‘this is what happened’) but so is the bigger picture (‘this is how I feel about it’).

For kids, a powerful way to bring calm when they are in the midst of a big feeling is to name the feeling. As put by [Mark Brackett from the Center for Emotional Intelligence](#), ‘if you can name it, you can tame it.’ When your child is in the thick of a big, angry feeling, name the feeling you see. ‘I can see that you’re really angry right now.’ ‘It has really upset you that you weren’t allowed to run through the supermarket. I get that. It’s hard having to be still sometimes isn’t it.’

Hearing the words that fit with their feelings will help to strengthen the connection between the right and left sides of their brain. When this happens, the emotion will start to ‘tame’. It will feel less like an ambush from a big woolly feeling and with your words, it will start to make sense. Be patient. It won’t happen straight away, but it will make a difference. It will also help to expand your child’s emotional vocabulary. This is a powerful part of developing their emotional intelligence, which is vital for any child as they grow.

- **Lift them up.**

Kids who find themselves regularly throwing tantrums or being aggressive will probably have a lot of focus put on their bad behaviour. Lift them up by focusing on their strengths. [Here are some common ones that come with anxiety.](#)

### **And finally ...**

If your child seems quick to anger, be open to the possibility that anxiety might be the culprit. The most powerful way to turn any type of anxiety around is to explain to children the driving force behind their behaviour. This will help to empower them and put the focus on their strengths in managing their behaviour and help lift them to full flight.